

Back Again Back Again: What Happened After

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode two: what happened after.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: But there's still so much that you don't know, dear listener. We're just barely short one year of six, accomplished. I'm nineteen, now, the oddest thing in the world, because I'm still seventeen in the story I'm telling you but twenty-five in my head.

My point is - the point I set out to make, at the beginning, before I got caught up in longing and everything outside, is our escape. It went something like - like this: I had just met Callia, my sword in her hands, and we were - running. We were - trying to run. Forcing our way out. I raised my sword - the one she'd just *tossed me*, the one she could *hold* though no one else

I'd ever met could, and we began to fight our way out. It was as if we could predict the other's movement, almost instinctively - I could tell when she'd strayed too far to one side and wouldn't be able to cover her front in time, could send magic blasting to keep her clear. She knew my blind spots, moved faster than I'd ever be able to - and we were destroying this place that had become my home now a stranger to me - or I was a stranger in it, clawing my way free - and then we were outside, out the front entrance - the barracks were round back, this was safer, somehow - and down the steps, and into the streets.

And - we fled.

And - I wish I could say I didn't look back.

The palace burned. The fire had spread - I'd watched Iolo and another girl, Rhia between them, knock over the huge brazier that burned in the entryway and fan the flames to a blaze as a detour before leaving. As we disappeared down into alleys and shops and the underground streets, still thick with cover from the festival, people streamed out of the castle, servants and nobles and visitors and despite myself - despite myself - I looked back. Caught myself scanning the faces of those stumbling out of the castle for dark curly hair, a familiar face, a prince's crown.

If it had been Sodom, I would have been salt. I was just as foolish as Lot's wife.

Somewhere in the world, Leander was running, but we were, too, the group of us dispersing - smaller numbers were harder to follow. Iolo and Rhia and their friend went in one direction, and Callia, no mercy, pulled me in the other. I shouted - *I'm not leaving her* - and was halfway through saying it in English before I realized my mistake and tried to switch to Rhysean. Callia rounded on me, snarling, before I could finish either and slammed me against an alley wall, one arm barring my chest, the other covering my mouth.

Quiet, *eligidida*. Do you want us to be killed? You and Rhia - she started, and then a lot more that I couldn't catch, then - spotted - more - city, - something angry, angrier than the rest - and then a phrase I'd heard from both Rhia and Cassian enough to not struggle to understand it. *Think before you act*.

He'd always laughed it, a joke and warning after I'd made a terrible mistake while training. There'd never been an ounce of venom behind it. Rhia had meant it, when she'd said it. She'd always meant, *there are consequences to your actions, Ilyaas*. I hadn't listened when it mattered most, there.

Don't make me leave her don't make me leave her, I thought, but listened to her reason over the aching of my heart. I was the distinguishable one, easy to pick from a crowd, and it would be safer for her if we were separate.

Of course, she also probably didn't want to be around me then.

I nodded, Callia's hand still over my mouth, and she eased off, grabbing my arm and tugging me through the streets. She ducked behind a temporary festival stage and into the huge tent that marked backstage and *home* both for this troupe of performers, gauze-y green fabric draping the entryway.

I stumbled inside after her, blowing hair out of my face, and nearly slammed into Callia, who'd stopped just dead of the entrance to speak to two of the performers - one of whom who held a possibly-prop-possibly-real-sword like he knew how to fight, a long silver earring swaying the motion of standing. The other performer, a girl with red light cast cross her face from the stained glass lamps lighting the room, hesitated behind him, a hand on a knife through her belt.

Callia raised her hands, slowly and deliberately pointing to me. *We've come -- promised*, she said in Rhysean, the middle getting lost around her accent, which was rougher than Cassian's or Rhia's - their words were rounded in a way hers weren't. The boy's face twisted, turning to look at the girl - his partner, fellow performer, what-have-you - who'd also intercepted us at the door.

I blinked, trying to place her face. It was only when I focused on her eyes - painted like moth's wings in green and gold, boring into mine - that it clicked.

Cassian and I had watched the two of them perform, the first night we'd wandered the festival. Before it all had gone to hell. They'd played at a bunch of different skits, and we'd tossed them coins, and Cassian had taken the girl's hags in his and thanked them for what they'd made.

She'd beamed, then. There was no sight of a smile now.

Unlike that night, too, she wasn't dressed in performance white - words were the basis of any good Rhysean performance, and white clothing - a "blank canvas," helped players to move between roles, helped their voices become the thing of note - but instead a poet-sleeved rust blouse and a many-folded green skirt. She snapped something to the boy with the sword - it wasn't quite Rhysean and it certainly wasn't English, so I hadn't a clue - and he lowered his sword - which was, likely, live steel - reluctantly.

Callia responded in that strange tongue - lilted Rhysean, Rhysean turned seventy-eight degrees on its side - and the girl relaxed. She offered Callia her hand and pulled her from a handshake into a hug, cupping her face with her free hand and setting her forehead against the soldier's.

The mood changed, lifted, became rowdier and far more alive. The girl called back the rest of the troupe, scattered throughout the tent, and they all leapt into action, digging around through their storage to pull out -

Disguises. Callia had come to them for disguises.

The performer girl turned to me. *Rec-og-nize-a-ble*, she said in slow Rhysean, drawing out each syllable. *It is better if you are not.*

The boy with the earring tossed me a scarf to cover my head with, a green skirt and blouse like the girls', a shawl to pull around my shoulders. Callia, without hesitation, began pulling a huge tunic and cloak on over her own battle clothes and flexible leather armor.

I froze, bundle of clothes clutched to my chest. I realized, in that moment, that I didn't know the Rhysean words for *change* or *privacy* and, though it sat half-formed at the back of my mouth, even what translated generally to *clothes*.

Callia seemed to catch the indecisiveness on my face. *Stop wasting time, eligidida*, she snapped. *We can't be* - a word I didn't know - *here*.

I changed. Fumbled off my court clothes and tried to offer them back to the performer boy in exchange for what he'd given me, but Callia caught my arm first. *Don't be stupid.*

The performer girl smiled and offered me a bag, instead.
Rec-og-nize-a-ble, she repeated, and pushed them into my arms.
The dress. Take it with you.

Callia grabbed the girl's hands, once free, and thanked her, their eyes locked together. She said something again in that strange language, not-quite Rhysean, Rhysean laced with internal rhyme, and the girl responded - *prosperanil traem, soldat* - before pushing us out the door.

Callia turned to me, evaluating, and put one hand to my face, brusquely pushing a stray piece of my hair back underneath my scarf. *Eligidida*, she said. *Be ready to run.*

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Patreon at patreon.com/backagainpodcast, where you'll gain access to bloopers, annotated transcripts, episode sneak-peeks, and more! If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigaillelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce

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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. Please remember that this world always tries to make you feel more alone than you truly are. There are people out there that will love you without condition or expectation, and you will find them. The light-soaked days are coming. I promise.

You are so, so very loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.